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ABSTRACT

The GALAXY Classroom, developed as a nation-wide reform effort, was designed to make a significant positive difference in the educational lives of elementary school students who have traditionally been labeled "at-risk." As part of a 2-year demonstration and research phase, 39 elementary schools across the United States (and one school in Mexico) were connected by an interactive satellite telecommunications network. Instead of taking the standard view that students who are considered "at-risk" are deficient or unprepared for school, the Galaxy Classroom staff believes that the present education system is unable or unwilling to meet the needs of all students. The Galaxy Classroom philosophy starts from the premise that all students come to school with strengths that will enable them to become proficient learners. Moving away from the traditional transmission-of-knowledge, subject-centered curriculum, the Galaxy Classroom adopted a constructivist, child-centered approach which is organized around themes. Galaxy's language arts curriculum for grades 3-5 makes children's literature--and the children themselves--the central focus of the program. This vision for meaningful learning is built on the concept of empowering students by providing them with opportunities to debate issues, share ideas, compare information, and work on collaborative projects with children across the country. (RS)

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'Galaxy is Awesome, Dude!':
Evaluating GALAXY and Its Place in the Educational Universe
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The GALAXY Classroom:

An Interactive, Thematic Approach to Literacy Instruction

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Introduction

The GALAXY Classroom, developed as a nation-wide reform effort, was designed to make a significant positive difference in the educational lives of elementary school students who have traditionally been labeled "at-risk." The project is a result of a collaboration between industry, national educational leaders, state and local school officials, the educational research community, the arts community, and most importantly, classroom teachers. As part of a two year demonstration and research phase, 39 elementary schools across the United States (and one school in Mexico) are connected by an interactive satellite telecommunications network. Each classroom is equipped with a fax machine, telephone, VCR, and TV which are linked by VSATs (Very Small Aperture Terminals) to enable two-way voice and data and one-way television communication. This allows for a variety of interactions including:

- Student to Student
- Classroom to Classroom
- Classroom to Galaxy Staff
- Classroom to Research Lab

The students participating in the demonstration phase of the GALAXY Classroom come from schools located primarily in inner-city urban and isolated rural communities.

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Philosophy

Instead of taking the standard view that students who are considered "at-risk" are deficient or unprepared for school, the Galaxy Classroom staff believes that the present educational system is unable or unwilling to meet

the needs of all students, especially those from ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds and/or poverty environments. Teachers have traditionally held low expectations for these students and have formally or informally tracked them into ability groups for literacy and mathematics instruction (Knapp, Turnbull, & Shields, 1990). They are also typically pulled out of class for "extra help" in Chapter 1 or other compensatory education programs. Being assigned to "slow" tracks and pull-out programs often stigmatizes the kids as "dummies," a discouraging label that may distort their entire school experience.

The instructional focus for many of these students is on mastery of discrete skills as a prerequisite for being allowed to engage in more meaningful, challenging work. Unfortunately, many students have difficulty learning skills in isolation because it is easier for children to learn language and literacy by going from wholes to parts (Hart, 1981). They spend endless hours struggling with skill lessons and never get to the "good stuff" -- the meaning-centered activities and assignments that include reading whole books, writing stories and plays, conducting scientific explorations, and researching topics of interest (Knapp, Turnbull, & Shields, 1990). They are asked to do more and more of what they can't do, year after year. These students are caught in a cycle of failure and their self-esteem starts deteriorating.

In contrast to this traditional view, the Galaxy Classroom philosophy starts from the premise that <u>all</u> students come to school with strengths (i.e. a strong oral language background, a rich cultural heritage, an awareness of environmental print, a language other than English, and a curiosity about natural phenomena) that will enable them to become proficient learners. Recognition of these individual assets, along with high expectations on the

part of teachers, are the starting points for building a curricular program in which students are respected, valued, and treated as capable, inquisitive learners. This underlying sense of respect for the inherent capacity of children as learners is the cornerstone of the Galaxy Classroom project philosophy.

The Thematic Curriculum

In moving away from the traditional transmission-of-knowledge, subject-centered curriculum, the GALAXY Classroom has adopted a constructivist, child-centered approach which is organized around themes. In his position paper, *Why Themes?*, Kucer (1991) points out the advantages of using a thematic approach to curriculum design.

- A thematic approach encourages the teacher to start with students' strengths and utilize their relevant background knowledge.
- Well-chosen themes are engaging and allow students to explore concepts from a variety of perspectives and viewpoints.
- Themes allow for the use of many different resources (books, magazines, newspapers, filmstrips, textbooks, hands-on materials, etc.) at varying degrees of difficulty, so that all students can participate.
- Themes can be a starting point from which students can pose their own questions and explore related topics of their own choosing.
- Themes provide contexts for "real-life" reading and writing activities, scientific investigations, and inquiries in a variety of subject areas.
- Themes promote an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and encourage students to build and integrate meanings across the curriculum.
- A thematic curriculum provides students with opportunities for independent learning, problem solving, divergent thinking, risk-taking, and choice.

One of the biggest issues we have faced in developing the GALAXY Classroom is reconciling the fact that in order to have common experiences that become the basis of communication and debates over the network, themes for the language arts curriculum had to be predetermined. We collaborated with teachers and students to choose themes based on children's literature that had wide interest and appeal. We selected seven social/interpersonal themes that are "meaty" enough for kids and teachers to negotiate extended topics.

Galaxy Themes

- People Are More Than They Appear To Be
- Establishing Your Own Space
- Who Is a Hero?
- It's Not Fair!
- Be True to Yourself
- People Need People
- People Working Together Can Make a Difference

In their 1991 article (p. 295), Altwerger and Flores describe the major differences between traditional thematic units and "theme cycles":

Theme Unit	Theme Cycle
Teacher-oriented, predetermined	Student-oriented, topic negotiated
Teacher responsible for all planning, organizing, materials	Student and teacher share responsibility
Based solely on teacher's learning goals	Based on students' and teacher's knowledge, questions, interests
Theme used as tool for learning subject areas, reading, writing	Subject areas, reading, writing used as tools for learning
Activities are focus	Learning process, critical thinking, problem-solving are focus

We have strived to build a curriculum where students and teachers collaboratively plan and negotiate the activities that go on during a theme cycle and where students are encouraged to pursue their own topics of study.

An Example of the Language Arts Curriculum

Galaxy's language arts curriculum for grades 3-5 makes children s literature -- and the children themselves -- the central focus of the program. We rely strongly on children's literature because of its engaging themes and its ageless and universal appeal to human feelings and needs. Through extensive use of multi-cultural literature, we celebrate diversity and affirm each student s own culture and linguistic heritage.

Because we believe that each child comes to the classroom with something of value to contribute, we have designed the curriculum to elicit these assets and use them to create authentic situations that motivate students to read and write on their own. For example, each four-week theme cycle begins with a 15-minute interactive video drama called THE HOUSE which explores a compelling theme, such as "It's Not Fair!", from multiple perspectives. In the dramatization, which takes place at an urban community center, the characters deal with issues and controversies related to fairness that resonate with elementary students. The scripts for this video was based on the following critical questions:

- What are some things that are unfair in your life? What makes these things unfair?
- Why are some people more apt to get unfair treatment than others?
- Why do laws or rules exist?
- Are all laws or rules fair? Why? Is it ever okay to break a law or a rule? When?

- How does fairness vary depending on your point of view?
- How can you change things that are unfair? Do you have to be an adult?
- Can you compromise on issues of fairness so everyone wins? How?

After viewing the broadcast, the students are encouraged to debate issues, consider a variety of points of view, read related literature, and collaborate on responses which they are invited to share with the rest of the Galaxy network. They are encouraged to fax their responses and creations to other classrooms across the country; to characters on THE HOUSE (produced by WGBH, Boston); to THE SECOND STORY, the companion student magazine that expands the theme; or to THE MAX, a student response publication ("Fax to THE MAX !"). The video programs, student magazines, and literature books are available in both English and Spanish.

To help students expand and explore their own theme-related issues and questions, teachers refer to a guide that presents a wide variety of suggestions for working in-depth with each theme. For example, students will have the opportunity to read works of children's literature, create plays, write their own books, give dramatic readings, compose editorials, and work on individual or group research projects related to aspects of the theme they find personally meaningful. They write for and receive responses from their peers, both in their own classroom and throughout the Galaxy network of schools. These suggested activities serve as springboards for students and teachers to design their own projects.

Near the end of the theme cycle, as a culmination to the exploration, students view the second theme-based video, which concludes the dramatic story line of the first show and actually incorporates some of the students'

reactions, ideas, and experiences they faxed to the characters on THE HOUSE. Students may also see their own work published in the "MAX" response publication from the magazine.

It is our hope that the GALAXY Classroom's thematic approach will encourage teachers and students to work together -- using reading and writing as tools for developing, refining, expanding, and communicating their thinking. This vision for meaningful learning is built on the concept of empowering students by providing them with opportunities to debate issues, share ideas, compare information, and work on collaborative projects with other kids across the country. We feel that this ability to expand the audiences and purposes for student communication has the potential for breaking down the classroom walls.

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